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# **WIRT DEXTER BUILDING**

630 South Wabash Avenue  
Chicago, Illinois

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Preliminary Staff Summary of Information  
Submitted to the Commission on Chicago Landmarks  
September, 1991

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## **WIRT DEXTER BUILDING**

**630 South Wabash Avenue  
Chicago, Illinois**

**DATE OF CONSTRUCTION: 1887**

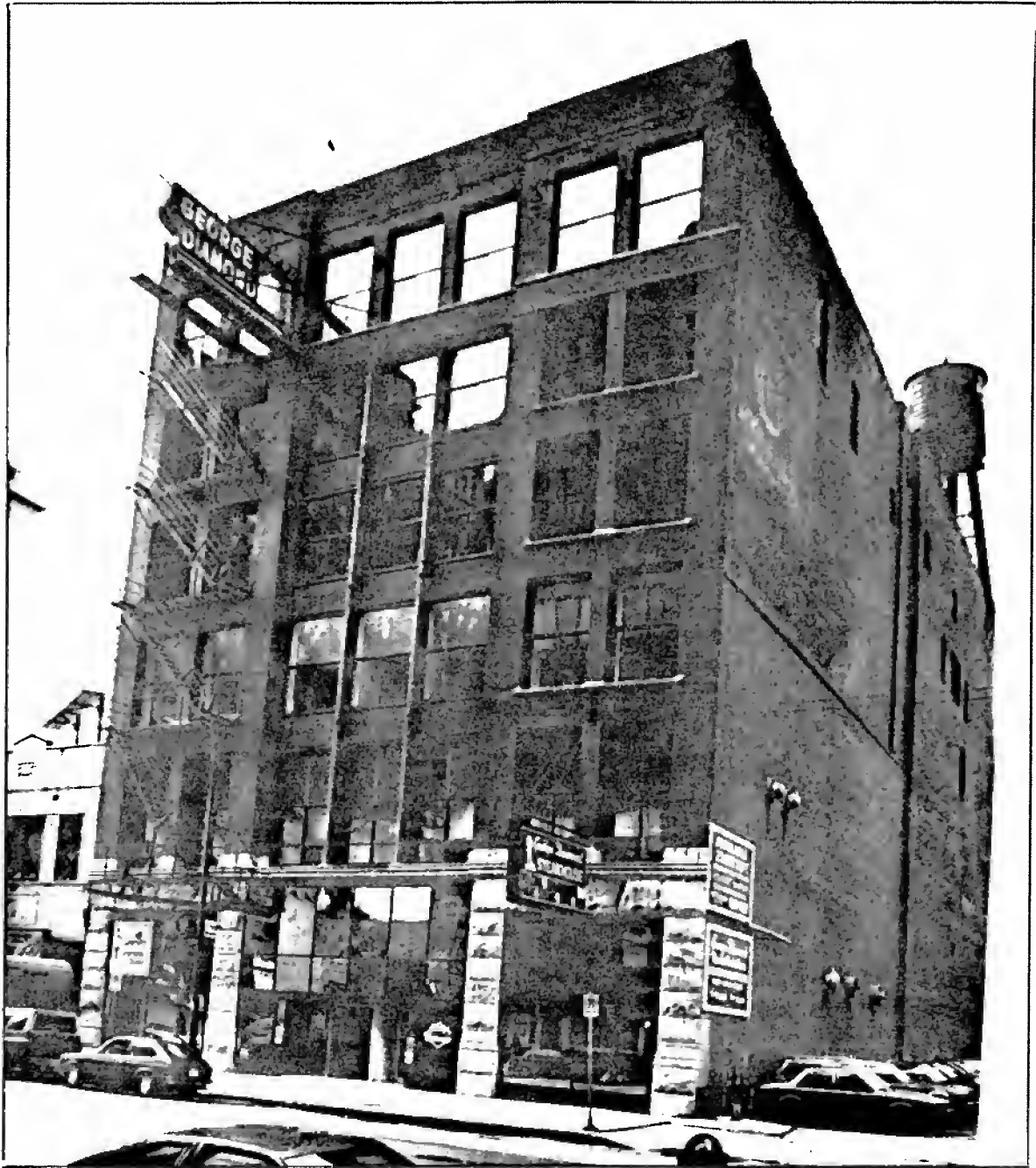
**ARCHITECT: Adler & Sullivan**

Many people assume that the primary significance of the architectural works of the office of Adler & Sullivan is derived from Louis H. Sullivan's distinctive design for architectural ornamentation, such as is seen in familiar works like the Auditorium Theater and the delicate ironwork of Carson Pirie Scott Store. These popularly held assumptions do a grave injustice to the true meaning and ideals which were at the core of Adler & Sullivan's approach to the practice of architecture. Perhaps the best understanding of Adler & Sullivan's work and philosophy can be gained from a study of the Wirt Dexter Building, a modest commercial loft which has the distinction of having virtually no ornament at all. Only after grasping the significance of this seemingly simple structure can one be fully prepared to understand the true meaning of Adler & Sullivan's more elaborately detailed works.

The surviving buildings documenting the contributions of Dankmar Adler and Louis H. Sullivan to international architectural thought and practice constitute a delicate chronological chain in which the Wirt Dexter Building is in integral and irreplaceable link. Although often overlooked by the casual observer, the Wirt Dexter speaks clearly and concisely to large and complex issues through its eloquent simplicity.

### ***The Commission for the Building***

The Wirt Dexter Building was erected in 1887 by Chicago attorney Wirt Dexter (1831-1890) as a means of improving property he held in the commercial manufacturing district on Wabash Avenue, immediately south of the central business district. By the mid-1880s, the area was rapidly being developed with factories and showrooms of various commercial enterprises, a majority of which were engaged either in the sale and manufacture of carriages or furniture. An agreement was apparently made between Dexter and the furniture manufacturing firm of R. Deimel & Brothers to improve Dexter's Wabash Avenue with a six-story loft to be used as a factory and showroom by the Deimel firm. On April 12, 1887, the Deimel firm applied for a permit to erect the new building. A week later, the Chicago Tribune reported that Adler & Sullivan was the architect for the project, and was "taking figures" for its construction.



The Wirt Dexter Building as it appears today. (*Terry Tatum, photographer*)

The selection of Adler & Sullivan as architect for the project was probably made by the owners of the Deimel firm rather than by Wirt Dexter. The Deimels were among many families in Chicago's Jewish community who turned to Adler & Sullivan for their architectural projects, perhaps owing to the fact that Dankmar Adler was himself a well known figure in Chicago Jewish social circles. In 1886, Adler & Sullivan prepared plans for the Calumet Avenue residence of Joseph Deimel (still standing but extensively altered), anticipating the

commission for the Deimel factory the following year. Although the building was erected on Dexter's property and is familiarly known by his name, there is no evidence indicating any previous contact between Dexter and the Adler & Sullivan office, or to indicate that he was directly involved in the commission. Dexter did, however, commission Adler & Sullivan to design an addition to his Prairie Avenue House in 1888 after the completion of the Deimel project, but this design was never built.

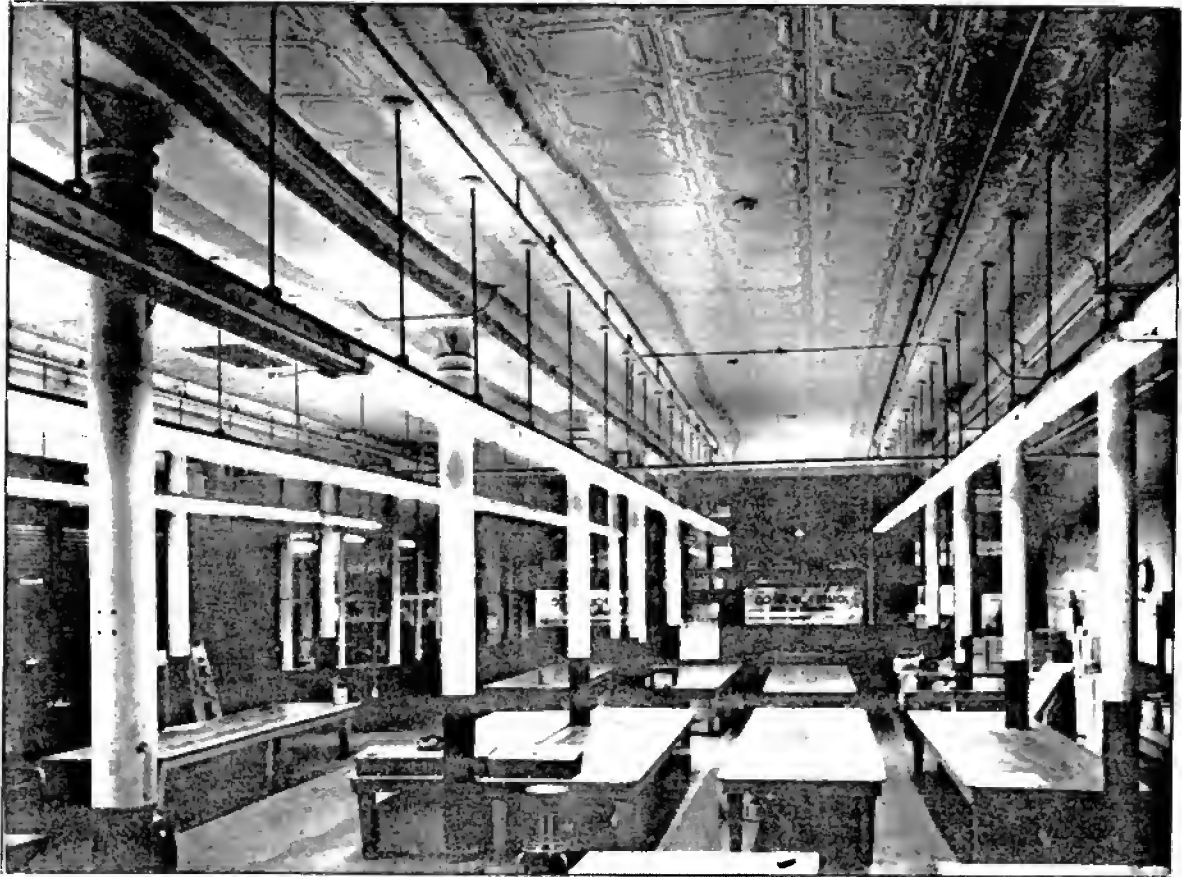
The furniture manufacturing firm of R. Deimel & Brothers was established by the brothers Rudolph, Joseph, and Simon Deimel in 1875, and was engaged in the business of manufacturing parlor furniture, lounges and rockers. By 1884, the firm employed approximately 275 people in its factory, located in a rented portion of a commercial loft building at the northwest corner of Wabash Avenue and Congress Street. The building housing their factory was completely destroyed by fire in 1886, probably motivating the erection of the building on the Dexter property the following year.

### *The Wirt Dexter Building*

Faced principally in red pressed brick, with its base and trim of buff Bedford limestone, the overall effect of the Wirt Dexter Building street facade is one of solidity, boldly emphasizing its masonry identity. The Wirt Dexter Building is a typical, six-story commercial loft type building, with unsubdivided interior floors suitable for manufacturing and mercantile use. Like other loft buildings of the period, the exterior walls are principally of load-bearing, masonry construction, and upon a cursory viewing, there is little to suggest the importance of the structure. However, its straightforward appearance belies its significance as a precursor of modern architectural design. Relative to the buildings of its day, the Wirt Dexter Building is an important departure in two distinct respects: its almost completely unornamented front elevation and the incorporation of cast-iron framing into the same facade. Both of these aspects were major steps toward the development of a modern architectural aesthetic.

Superficially, the building is a variation on the Romanesque style of architecture that held sway in the architectural community during the late nineteenth century. Distinguishing elements such as rough-hewn stonework and arched openings appeared on every type of building, from houses and churches, to commercial buildings and courthouses. At this particular point in Louis Sullivan's career, as the design partner for the firm, such a stylistic reference was only a jumping off point for Sullivan's architectural insights.

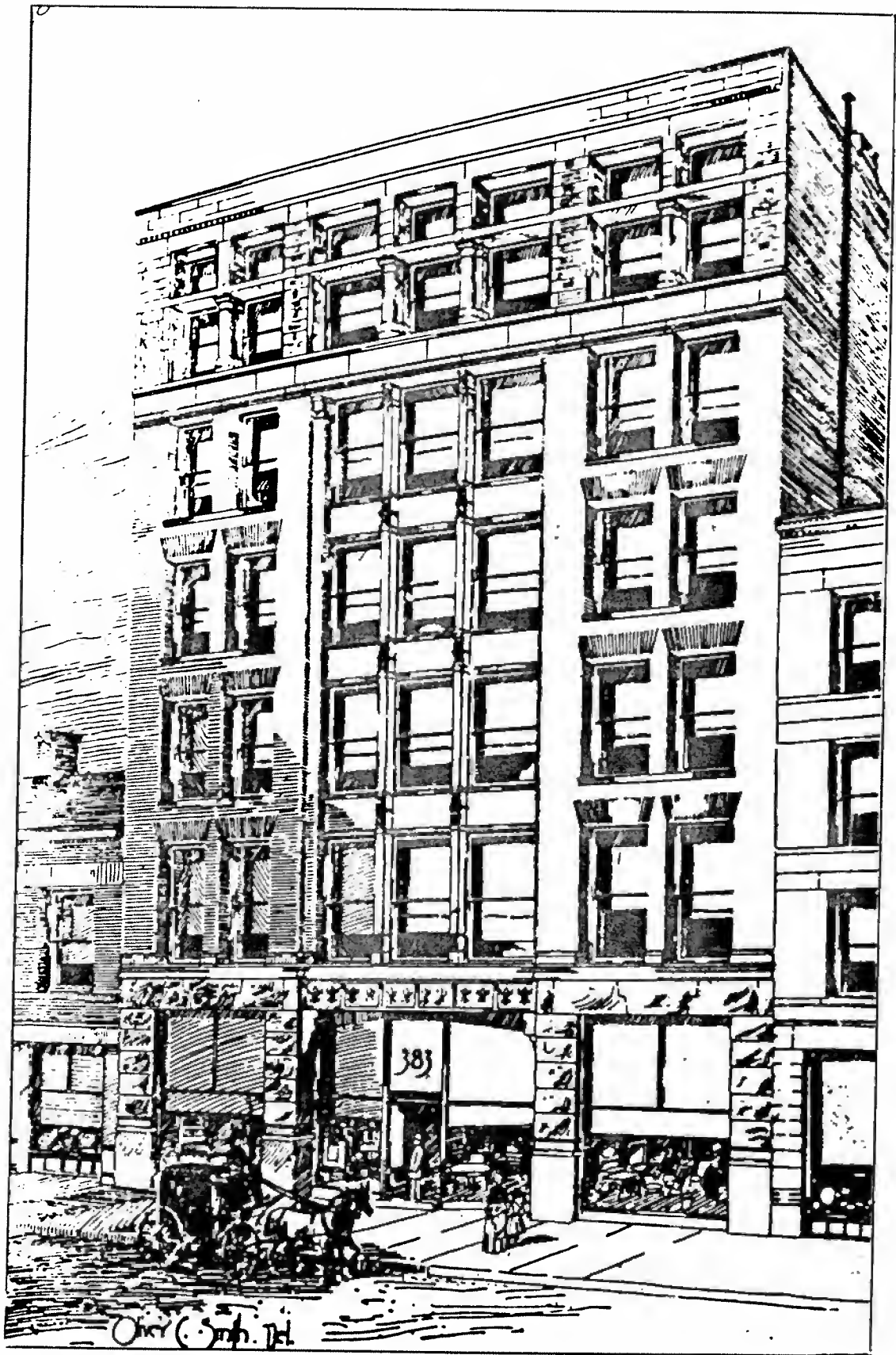
The Wirt Dexter Building is divided, both horizontally and vertically, into three-part arrangements. Horizontally, the building is separated into the ground floor, the middle section of the second through fifth stories, and the attic story. Vertically, a pair of symmetrical bays are set off from the central bay by two continuous masonry piers. The most obvious reference to Romanesque architecture in the Wirt Dexter Building is the rough-hewn Bedford stone ground floor. As originally built, the street elevation design illustrated another, more subtle reference to Romanesque architecture, specifically, to the design of the Marshall Field Wholesale Store by H. H. Richardson (1887; southwest corner of Franklin and Adams street;



Ground-floor interior, circa 1956, showing typical loft building construction, using iron columns for support. (Richard Nickel, photographer)

demolished in 1930), perhaps the most influential building to the nineteenth-century Romanesque revival. One of the most sophisticated aspects of the Field Store design was the pattern of the windows openings, the size of which diminished from the base of the building to the top, subtly underscoring the horizontal divisions of the building. The window arrangement of the Dexter Building is similar to that of the wholesale store, although not as emphatic, due to the considerably smaller scale of the Dexter. Nonetheless, the Dexter's striations, even at such a reduced scale, are clear: with the change from stone to brick between the first and second floors, and from the monolithic wall treatment of the second-through-fifth floors to the colonnaded top floor. Together with the smaller window openings at this level and the masonry lintels for the transoms, the colonnade gave the top story a distinctive horizontal element to cap the composition.

Relative to other buildings of the era, including earlier buildings by Sullivan, the Wirt Dexter Building is distinctive for the lack of decorative ornamentation. At this point in his career, Sullivan was already a proven master of ornamental design; however, his focus had never been on ornament simply for the sake of beauty. His use of ornament had always been tied to larger architectural themes, and he used it very specifically on structures to



Architect's rendering of the Wirt Dexter Building, from the *Inland Architect*, November, 1887.

metaphorically express the organic forces that animate architecture. With the Wirt Dexter, and other buildings during the next three years, Sullivan focused on the decorative qualities inherent in other architectural elements, particularly with the wall surface itself.

In the Wirt Dexter Building, the principal ornamental focus is on the monolithic appearance of the wall. To a degree, the uniform treatment of broad wall expanses was always a characteristic of Romanesque architecture, and since medieval times, rough-faced stone was generally used. Sullivan, however, in a distinct recognition of the innovations in materials technology during the latter half of the century, chose a hard-baked, pressed red brick for the principal facing material of the Wirt Dexter Building. Overall, there is a strong planar quality to the brick portions of the Wirt Dexter composition, as the spandrels (the portions of the wall underneath the windows) are held flush with the vertical piers. In effect, the wall becomes a uniform clay screen. In addition to this larger architectural effect created in brick, Sullivan's appreciation of the decorative characteristics of brickwork is evidenced by the detailing of the voussoired window lintels.

Into this brick mass, Sullivan introduced a cast-iron structural system. On the second through fifth floors, the central bay is set back from the flanking masonry bays, and, in contrast to the masonry piers of the side bays, the central bay consists of exposed cast-iron piers. These piers are spanned by cast-iron lintels carrying brick spandrels. The use of brick spandrels for this central bay integrates the slender cast-iron framing system within the larger masonry massing.

The incorporation of structural iron into the elevations of commercial buildings by Sullivan was an important step as it permitted larger window openings to be employed than would have been possible through the use of masonry alone. In the days before mechanical air circulation systems and at a time when artificial light was in its nascent stage, windows were vital. Thus, the larger windows were, the more light and air came into the building. Because cast-iron has greater compressive strength than stone, the use of iron allowed larger openings while maintaining the structural integrity of the walls.

Another effective and straightforward use of cast iron on the front facade of the Wirt Dexter Building was its use in carrying the central bay over the single opening for the ground-floor display area. The bay is carried on an exposed, built-up plate girder supported by cut-stone corbels projecting from the surrounding Bedford limestone, creating a striking visual transition between the bearing masonry of the base, and the metal framing of the central bay.

The alley elevation is also notable for its incorporation of what constitutes almost a complete system of skeletal framing. Exposed vertical cast-iron members extend almost the full height of the alley facade, joined horizontally by slender iron lintels and sills carrying brick spandrels. The result is a rear wall with almost floor-to-ceiling windows, allowing the afternoon sun to enter the interiors almost unobstructed.

Although altered over the years, the Wirt Dexter Building retains the basic aesthetic and technological aspects which makes it a significant milestone in Adler & Sullivan's contributions to international architectural thought and practice. After the firm of R. Deimel & Brothers went into bankruptcy in 1890, the building became the showroom and assembly plant of the Columbus Buggy Company. Prior to 1934, the top story was damaged by fire, requiring the removal of the original colonnaded top story treatment of the street facade. Its simpler





On the alley elevation, perforated cast iron braces the back wall in order to open it up as much as possible for natural light on the interior. (*Timothy Barton, photographer*)

replacement matches the original brick so closely that it is often mistakenly described in architectural history books as being part of the original design. In the late 1980s, the windows on the street facade were modified with new aluminum replacements. On the rear elevation, the window openings were reduced in size. Nevertheless, the alterations are reversible and leave the significant aspects of the building intact.



## *The Wirt Dexter Building in the Context of Alder and Sullivan's Work*

During their fifteen years of architectural partnership, between 1880 and 1895, Dankmar Adler (1844-1900) and Louis H. Sullivan (1856-1924) made significant advances in architectural theory and practice which gained international attention, and impacted the development of modern architectural movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Boldly rejecting the accepted practice of designing buildings based on historically derived design precedents, Adler & Sullivan created original designs which were organically developed from the functional requirements of each individual project and the materials and technologies of the time. These designs were abstracted into harmonious solutions which integrated functional and aesthetic requirements into unified architectural solutions.

During the early 1880s, Adler & Sullivan's practice was limited to designs for residences and small commercial buildings, these commissions garnered primarily from Adler's contacts in the Jewish community. Unlike the firms of Burnham & Root or William Le Baron Jenney, who received many of the large commissions, Adler & Sullivan did not design any of the large-scale office buildings during the early years of the commercial real estate boom that took place throughout the 1880s. It wasn't until the office received the commission for the Auditorium Building in 1886, due largely to Adler's reputation for theater design and his previous dealings with Ferdinand Peck, the principal promoter of the Auditorium project, that the firm began to receive the commissions for the large-scale projects which highlighted the partnership's design philosophy. Thus, much of the innovation in the firm's work is seen in the early, small commercial designs that were the mainstay of the partnership's livelihood.

The early buildings were small in scale, generally no more than five stories, and were intended for general retail, office, and warehouse use. The Ryerson and Troescher buildings (both built in 1884 and now demolished) are the outstanding examples of the work from this period. Structurally, the buildings were of masonry and semi-mill construction or were variations of the type. In this traditional method the floor joists are supported by a combination of the exterior load-bearing masonry walls and intermediate interior columns. The buildings had an exuberance of distinctive ornament treatment, featuring panels of stylized botanical forms placed on the building in such a way as to suggest the organic, or creative, development of architecture. Overall the buildings evidence a distinctive attempt to develop a design grammar for commercial architecture.

Sullivan worked at refining the type, and with the commercial lofts of this early period he initiated an important structural feature. Because the load-bearing function of the wall limited the size of the window openings, Sullivan introduced the use of an iron framework in the central bays of these buildings as a means of enlarging openings to admit more light and air into the building interiors. In his autobiography, Sullivan discussed this innovation:

The building business was again under full swing and a series of important mercantile structures came into the office, each one of which he [Sullivan] treated experimentally, feeling his way toward a basic process, a grammar of his own. The immediate problem was increased daylight, the



In contrast to the masonry in the side bays, the central unit of the Wirt Dexter Building is comprised of a cast-iron frame, allowing larger window openings. (*Timothy Barton, photographer*)

maximum of daylight. This led him to use slender piers, tending toward a masonry and iron combination, the beginnings of a vertical system. This method upset all precedent, and led Louis's contemporaries to regard him as an iconoclast, a revolutionary, which was true enough--yet into the work was slowly infiltrated a corresponding system of artistic expression, which appeared in these structures as novel and to some repellent, in its total disregard of accepted notions.

The straightforward expression of masonry as a cladding for a skeletal metal structure as exemplified in the central bay of the street facade of the Wirt Dexter Building represents the beginnings of the forms which Adler & Sullivan was later to develop in their skyscraper designs, starting with the Wainwright Building (1890-92) in St. Louis and continuing with such later buildings as the Schiller Theater (1891-92; demolished) and Chicago Stock Exchange Building (1893-94; demolished) in Chicago, and the Guaranty Building (1894-96) in Buffalo, New York.

In contrast with the direct ornateness of the early work, the Wirt Dexter Building belongs to an important period in the firm's design chronology, which Sullivan referred to as the "masonry period." It marked a transition from the work that featured an exuberance of Sullivan ornament to the spartan form of the skyscraper. The design focus in this transitional period was on the basic architectural character of the elevations. The use of ornament was limited; instead, designs featured massive wall surfaces, punctuated with rhythmic openings. As indicated by Sullivan, these works were meant to explore the "limitations as well as great value of unadorned masses." Works from this period include the Auditorium Building (1886-1890), the Walker Warehouse (1888-89; demolished), and the Martin Ryerson Tomb (1887-89).

Adler & Sullivan created the Dexter Building as a unified whole, achieving harmony and balance through innovative abstractions of function, technology, and site conditions. Seemingly simple, the building is in fact a complex unity of contrasts and opposites--horizontal to vertical, solid to void, flat to textured, light to shadow, fluid to static, and the inherent differences and interrelationships of building materials. Most other architects ignored these subtle relationships or refused to put forth the required effort to resolve such issues in such a modest commission. It took a special genius to create an eloquent statement of simplicity. The Wirt Dexter Building clearly demonstrates Dankmar Adler and Louis H. Sullivan's unique genius and represents an irreplaceable documentation of their impact on the development of modern architectural thought and practice.



Circa 1893 view, from *The Standard Guide to Chicago*, of the Wirt Dexter Building as constructed, illustrating its original top-floor configuration.

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Additional material used in the preparation of this report is on file at the office of the Commission on Chicago Landmarks and is available to the public.

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### *Staff for this Publication*

Timothy Barton, *research and writing*

*The Commission on Chicago Landmarks was established in 1968 by city ordinance, and was given the responsibility of recommending to the City Council that specific landmarks be preserved and protected by law. The ordinance states that the Commission, whose nine members are appointed by the Mayor, can recommend any area, building, structure, work of art, or other object that has sufficient historical, community, or aesthetic value. Once the City Council acts on the Commission's recommendation and designates a Chicago Landmark, the ordinance provides for the preservation, protection, enhancement, rehabilitation, and perpetuation of that landmark. The Commission assists by carefully reviewing all applications for building permits pertaining to the designated Chicago Landmarks. This insures that any proposed alteration does not detract from the qualities that caused the landmark to be designated.*

*The Commission makes its recommendations to the City Council only after extensive study. This preliminary summary of information has been prepared by the Commission staff and was submitted to the Commission when it initiated consideration of the historical and architectural qualities of this potential landmark.*



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